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ABSTRACT

A number of counter-assumptions can be posited to challenge the usual basic assumptions of the professional literacy establishment. These counter-assumptions include the following: (1) literacy is not just a technical skill neutral across all cultures; (2) culture refers to basic questions about truth and knowledge and varies from one society to another; (3) most people in the contemporary world have some acquaintance with literacy--there is a continuum of literacy rather than a dichotomy between the literate and the illiterate; (4) the recipients of literacy campaigns are not blank slates--they have knowledge and opinions; (5) the cultural context of literacy campaigns should be assessed according to a society's views of what is knowledge and not be imposed from outside; and (6) literacy campaigns always involve power relations that need to be considered if they are to be successful. Implications of these counter-assumptions can be examined in recent accounts of literacy in early modern England. Some examples of culture contact and literacy can also be seen in Iran and India. Contradicting traditional autonomous models of literacy, recent research finds that the association of literacy with social mobility and economic progress is not borne out. Literacy and orality are no longer considered separate, but a mix of skills. Such new thinking about literacy campaigns can be applied to those of the 1990s. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Cultural meanings of literacy

by Brian V. Street

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The development of a clear and honest view of what literacy actually means must have higher priority than simply the pious repetition of hopes about the 'eradication' of 'illiteracy' and the need to spread literacy to all of the world's population. I would like, therefore, to question some of the basic assumptions about literacy which are held in educational and political circles, amongst both activists in literacy campaigns and theorists in universities and colleges. I would like to suggest a number of counter-assumptions upon which literacy work could more fruitfully be based in the coming decade. These are that:

(1) *'Literacy'* is not just a technical skill, neutral and universal across all societies: it involves fundamental concepts and values at the level of culture;

(2) *'Culture'* is not just a matter of 'opinions' or 'beliefs' as though these were choices to be adopted or discarded like goods in a supermarket or political parties at an election. 'Culture' refers to basic questions about what is truth and what is knowledge and how they vary from one social grouping to another. The acquisition of literacy always involves some degree of change for the participants at this level. It is thus more a matter of personal identity, knowledge and power than of functional skills;

(3) Most people in the contemporary world have some acquaintance with literacy, whether through knowledge of a national or international literacy (from labelling on goods to television uses of script for instance) or of a local, 'vernacular' literacy: it is therefore misleading to create a dichotomy between the 'illiterate' and the 'literate', the reality is of varying acquaintance and expertise with a range of literacies;

(4) Those to whom literacy campaigns are addressed are, therefore, seldom 'tabulae rasae', although they are often treated as such by campaigners, and the nature and quality of their literacy acquaintance is mostly overlooked: the recipients of literacy campaigns already know and have ideas about (a) what literacy means and how it is to be used, and (b) what knowledge is and how to judge when it is appropriate and true;

(5) The '*cultural context*' of literacy campaigns should be assessed at this level, not at the level of popular representations of 'other cultures', such as that they involve 'quaint customs', 'backward traditions', 'ignorance' etc.; yet much campaign literature still begins from these demeaning and patronising assumptions about cultural variety, and extends from these to the often unquestioned assumption that 'illiteracy' equals 'ignorance'.

(6) Literacy campaigns, whether internal to a nation or overtly involving 'foreign' influence and expertise, always involve power relations: teachers, administrators, learners and politicians are disputing the right to define what is knowledge and truth, and to spread their version of reality to the population at large. It is, of course, now common knowledge that those who bring a 'functional' view of literacy to the campaign and to the classroom are in conflict with those who would bring 'conscientization'. In more anthropological terms, both of these groups may be bringing, embedded in their own literacy practices and beliefs, concepts of time, space, justice, truth, identity, rights etc. that conflict with those of the learners. However, the history of literacy campaigns in the recent past suggests that it is not always the seemingly more powerful oustiders who win these struggles. Indeed, it may be precisely because these deeper aspects of literacy practices have not been considered that many literacy campaigns have failed.

I would like to develop some of the implications of these views about literacy, with reference to examples from a range of cultures and times. I begin with some recent accounts of literacy in early modern England, since these may be less charged than accounts of contemporary society and their message may therefore be less distorted by immediate concerns. I will then describe some examples of culture contact and literacy in Iran and India, in terms of the points laid out above, and conclude by suggesting ways in which new thinking about literacy might contribute to the literacy campaigns of the 1990s. I hope, thereby, to begin bridging the 'gap' between theory and practice that has been observed in the field of literacy work.

LITERACY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Recent evidence from early modern England, for instance, forces us to be more precise about what we actually mean when we refer to literacy. Keith Thomas, writing about literacy in Tudor and Stuart England, points out that being 'literate' depended upon a number of different factors which varied from one context to another. The kind of 'literacy' a person claimed could make a considerable difference, for instance, in the penalties to which they were subject, if found guilty of particular crimes. For legal purposes the status of 'literatus' was demonstrated by reading aloud a passage written in Latin, whilst being able to read and

write Anglo-Saxon merited the label 'illiteratus'. In other contexts, distinctions were made between different forms of writing: one might be able to read the Bible in Roman script but not be deemed 'literate' where ability to interpret Gothic script or cursive was required. Before considering the importance and role of literacy in people's lives, then, one must first ask, 'Which literacy?'

The ways in which literacy was learned also reflected current interests. In fourteenth century England, the first written material a child was likely to encounter was the text of a prayer. The historian Michael Clanchy cites examples in which the text consisted of a mixture of signs and languages: the text was headed by a Christian cross and introduced by a prayer in Latin, followed by the letters of the Roman alphabet and then by a text in English. This indicated the order of importance attributed to different aspects of literacy practice, and was based upon the scholarly tradition of dividing things into their constituent parts. Prayers were the starting point for learning, then Latin scripture, followed by the letters of the alphabet which were to be learned before confronting actual text. A 'book' was frequently a board with a prayer nailed to it, and a 'primer' was not a 'learning-to-read' text, but referred rather to the act of learning to pray. To answer the question 'what is literacy?' one needs first to ask, 'what is knowledge?'. In this context knowledge was concerned with prayer and one's relationship to God, whereas in present-day literacy learning in England, the knowledge which texts and teachers are trying to impart is concerned with cognitive skills and one's relationship to one's fellow men. A secular scale of learning has superseded the religious one. Similar distinctions are to be found in all cultures, and the imposition of ideas about learning and literacy taken from one period or culture to another is ethnocentric and frequently counter-productive.

An example of just such a cultural misunderstanding is to be found in a well-known literacy project carried out in India during the 1970s. The Mahbubnagar Experiment was carried out by the Indian Council for Social Development in an area of Andhra Pradesh having both literacy and health problems. The project organizers linked these two issues and set out to test whether local health and nutrition could be improved by increasing literacy levels. They began with the assumption that acquisition of literacy leads to 'new mental capacities' and that literacy is necessary for change; that literate people are more likely to accept new ideas, in this case about hygiene, and to remember what they have been taught, in this case knowledge about health and parenthood. It was, then, to be expected that areas with high infant mortality and poor hygienic practices on the part of mothers could be 'improved' by a dose of literacy training.

Three different programmes were set up to enable comparison and to test these assumptions: mother-child centres (MCC) where health awareness and nutrition were taught orally and by demonstration to mothers with small children, the health experts also supplying medicines and nutritional assistance; functional literacy training (FLIT) in which mothers were given literacy classes; and control villages where either a mix of FLIT and MCC was provided or no programme at all. The MCC programme had by far the highest success rate, as measured by various indicators of health, nutrition and mortality. Second was the mixed programme of MCC and FLIT, whilst FLIT on its own was a failure. The literacy programme suffered high drop-out rates and the acquisition of literacy in itself appeared to make very little difference to retention of

knowledge or health practices. The programme and its assumptions have been extensively reviewed and criticised, but I would like to focus here on the cultural aspects of its failure.

In a review of the literature on this project, Jane Bonnick, an anthropology student at Sussex University, argued that a major reason for low enrolment and high drop-out from FLIT by women was that their cultural assumptions about literacy were at variance with those of the project. For female villagers, literacy was viewed as a male activity, and associated with white collar jobs in urban areas. They could not see why it was being offered to them, since their role was to manage the house and to bring up children. Furthermore, many women were refused permission by their husbands to attend the FLIT programme, or had to attend crying children since their husbands wouldn't look after them, thus disrupting the classes still further. Interestingly, although the project was attempting to change cultural values in the villages, the organizers themselves appear to have subscribed to the same traditional view of the role of women as did the villagers: they were addressing women in their role as mothers and homemakers, and paid no attention to their other roles. Women, for instance, made a major contribution to village economy and health through participation in the work force. Bonnick suggests that women in this context suffered a double disadvantage, in that being both poor and women obliged them to do two full jobs – at home and outside. The 'problem' of poor nutrition was related to this double role and to traditional assumptions about male/female relations: the organizers saw only 'women' in isolation.

The part of the programme that succeeded was that in which direct and practical help was provided to the women, through nutrition supplements and medicines, thus offsetting the consequences of their poverty and their double disadvantage. The focus on literacy in

itself was both less relevant to practical and material circumstances and subject to serious cultural misunderstandings. The message for literacy organizers appears to be:

(1) do not separate literacy training from other significant aspects of social life – a factor that has begun to be built in to recent campaigns;

(2) develop more sensitivity to cultural meanings of literacy, including different gender perceptions – a factor that has yet to be given more than token attention.

LITERACY IN IRAN

A similar critique can be made of literacy programmes under the Shah in Iran during the 1970s. The familiar language of disease and of warfare prevented sensitivity to the cultural meanings of literacy, in a country with rich historical and religious traditions and cultural variation. A Literacy Corps of youths drafted into the army was to go to villages and train the locals, not only in literacy but also in how to manage their lives, improve their health and organize their political relations. Young teenagers, many from urban areas or from ethnically different parts of the country, found themselves in isolated villages with minimal training but with the assumption that they were to 'lead' untaught villagers. In fact the villagers had both complex political systems and considerable acquaintance with literacy through Koranic learning, but they were treated as though they were completely ignorant. Inevitable culture clashes occurred as the Corpsmen tried to impose their view of literacy and learning, and the familiar low attendance and high drop-out rates followed.

The development of state primary schools also involved elements of cultural dissonance. Newly trained teachers were obliged to spend a period in village schools in order to qualify, although their career aspirations were focused on urban schools and advancement. Many commuted large distances from urban areas rather than live in the village and join in rural life, and they differentiated themselves from the villagers by dress, speech and manners. Moreover, the government and educational documents provided as background to their presence there, reinforced their prejudices about 'backward' and 'ignorant' villagers.

As in the Mahbubnagar Experiment, the views of women expressed in these circles were particularly subject to cultural misunderstanding and bias. One Iranian educationalist, Gholam Gharib, wrote that 'the psychological attitudes of Iranian villagers create a great obstacle to rural reconstruction', and in particular the attitudes of mothers were deplored: 'family life remains the most stubborn core of resistance to change'. Mothers were 'permissive', had poor standards of health and hygiene and had a passive belief in fate. The positive aspects of their role in the economic sphere as well as the domestic, and their own interest in acquiring literacy, were not recognised and built upon. Rather, 'war' was waged against them and they were treated simply as a means of gaining access to their sons. Similarly, the literacy acquired through Koranic learning was ignored or treated as something 'backward' to be replaced by 'modern' education, rather than built upon and developed.

In some villages where I lived during the early 1970s, it was evident how mistaken these views were: a number of older men trained in the Koranic school, the 'maktab', had developed skills in reading and writing that they were able to adapt to the new circumstances of a booming urban economy demanding produce from the villages. In these mountain villages fruit was

the main crop and the maktab-educated men used their literacy skills to organize the packaging, sale and distribution of the apples, pears and cherries abundant in these areas. Adherence to tight timetables was required in dispatching the fruit to urban markets; deals had to be struck quickly between middle men and city dealers, and accounts had to be kept of these transactions; cheques, promissory notes and lists of produce had to be drawn up and exchanged; boxes had to be properly labelled and drivers had to be given lists of what they were carrying and get signatures of receipt. All of this was conducted, not by students from the state school in the villages, but by men educated at the maktabs: the literacy they had learned there had been focused upon quite different purposes – primarily reading and reciting passages fom the Koran and from commentaries – but they had adapted it to the new conditions, and developed a new 'commercial' literacy out of their Koranic literacy.

A general principle illustrated by such examples is that the new literacy practices were successful because they were a product of local initiative and flexibility, rather than simply an imposition from outside. In this case, a creative compromise was effected between religious and secular uses of literacy. As a result of these adaptations in literacy practices, the villages as a whole were able to take full advantage of the oil boom and the urban demand it generated for their products; to hold their own against city merchants; and to develop their commercial as well as their agricultural expertise. The campaigners, from both the Literacy Corps and the state schools, had overlooked local literacy practices that were both valuable in their own right and could have provided a firm foundation on which to build the 'school' literacy.

Note that 'school' literacy differs from both 'maktab' literacy and 'commercial' literacy: the different literacies were related with different cultural and economic

spheres and were practised by different groups within the villages, although some overlap existed. A sensitive consideration of the cultural meanings of literacy in such a context would take account of this variety, treat it as positive and recognise its value as a resource in changing circumstances. Sensitive educators would thus find here material to build upon and develop towards their particular literacy aims. In the 1970s in Iran, such sensitivity was mostly lacking; instead villagers were assumed to be simply 'illiterate' and therefore 'ignorant', waiting to be 'filled with knowledge', as Paulo Freire's 'banking' theory of education suggests. In the 1990s, perhaps we can learn from some of the mistakes of that earlier period, and use the knowledge we are now beginning to acquire about cultural variety in the meanings and uses of literacies.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight recent developments in a number of academic disciplines and in educational ideas that could fruitfully combine with the new cultural understandings as a basis for the literacy campaigns of the next decade.

The major challenge to traditional theories of literacy in recent research has been to the assumption that literacy is a single, autonomous thing that, once acquired has direct consequences for everything from mental processes and logic to economic 'take-off'. According to this autonomous model of literacy, it is assumed that there is a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, an evolutionary pyramid at the top of which stands Western, alphabetic, essay-text literacy. In contrast, other varieties of literacy practice, to the extent that they are identified at all, are judged inferior. The acquisition of 'proper' (Western) literacy would then lead to progress, civilization, individual liberty, social mobility, cognitive development, logic etc. The list is endless and varies according to the interests of those employing it in a particular situation.

The Literacy Myth

Recent work in a variety of academic subjects has demonstrated the problems with these expectations. The historian Harvey Graff, for instance, in the aptly entitled *The Literacy Myth*, points out that the association of literacy with social mobility, economic progress, escape from poverty etc. is not borne out by statistics. In nineteenth century Canada, for example, a person's religion or ethnicity made the crucial difference regarding wealth or poverty, not whether they were literate. The reason for the attempt to spread literacy through a national school system was not, as claimed, to educate the masses, but rather to control them, to teach them the disciplines necessary for the factory floor and to assimilate the variety of language uses in the society to

a single standard – that of the ruling group. Lessons in literacy, for instance, frequently involved students reading aloud so that their pronunciation could be 'corrected': the homogenization of dialects rather than the broadening of minds and opportunities was what was at stake. Many analysts would suggest that a similar process is at work in numerous literacy campaigns today. In this sense, the claims made for literacy are a cruel 'myth' when tested against actual outcomes.

The Great Divide

The traditional view of literacy has also rested on the assumption of a 'great divide' between literacy and orality. Oral cultures were assumed to lack skills and abilities associated only with literacy, such as the distinction of myth from history (an ironical claim in the light of Graff's criticisms of Western society's own myths); the ability to reason abstractly, to distance oneself from immediate concerns in a scientific, detached or objective way; and the ability to make critical judgements. The psychologists Scribner and Cole have attempted to test some of these assumptions amongst the Vai peoples of Liberia, who had three literacies – Arabic, Roman and Vai. Indigenous Vai literacy was learned outside of school, so the researchers could test for the effects of 'literacy without schooling'. On the basis of a battery of psychological tests for a range of cognitive skills, such as memory and logic, they concluded that literacy in itself did not make much difference. Schooling did have consequences for certain cognitive skills, including explicitness and deductive reasoning, but that was to be explained by the cultural and educational context of the school. Literacy, in its various forms, did not by itself affect higher-order skills such as logic and abstract reasoning. The premises on which many literacy campaigns have been founded are seriously challenged by this work, and a more culturally sensitive awareness of different literacies and of

the differences between literacy and schooling are now required.

Anthropologists have also begun to explore local oral and literacy practices and to discover the richness and complexity of what had previously been overlooked in indigenous cultures. The anthropologist Ruth Finnegan has worked in Africa amongst peoples with rich oral traditions of storytelling and language play. She discovered that all of the mental operations attributed to literacy by previous scholars were clearly present in oral cultures. Shirly Brice Heath, a teacher turned researcher, working in the Piedmont Carolinas of the eastern United States, similarly found the home cultures of schoolchildren to be skilled in language play and storytelling, providing a basis for school work that was unfortunately not built upon once the children started formal education. The people she studied, for instance, used literacy in a collaborative way rather than privately. They would gather around someone on a verandah on receipt of a letter and negotiate its meaning communally, then compose a reply and discuss the style and genre that was appropriate. The meaning and uses of literacy in such a context was clearly different from that in mainstream educational contexts, where literacy was considered a sole, separate and silent activity. Heath's aim as a teacher, as well as a researcher, was to enable the school to make use of the collaborative literacy of the students' home background in addition to the traditional features of schooled literacy.

A 'Writing Process Movement' in the United States of America has built upon insights such as this to develop strategies for teaching literacy that may be relevant to campaigns in other parts of the world. Students write journals in which they 'talk' with the teacher, receiving written responses from her in the same book and so build up a literacy document that records a *process* of dialogue rather than simply an end *product* for

testing purposes, as with so much literacy material. Writing in these situations is treated as a process of direct communication, with features similar to those traditionally associated with oral interaction.

The Oral-Literate Mix

Theorists now recognise a mix of oral—literate skills, rather than viewing literacy and orality as entirely separate. According to this view, the uses of literacy in daily life are most often not the separate, sole and silent activities of traditional schooling, but a mix of oral and literate conventions. The written word is usually embedded in an oral context, people speak around it, write things down, read, speak again. What people operating in such contexts have learned is not only the rules and conventions of literate practice and of speech, but also those of the mixed repertoire of speech-and-literacy; in a sense the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. These are frequently the skills required by modern work situations, and thus the implications for classroom practice and for world-wide literacy campaigns are considerable:

- training students in collective negotiation of meaning around script and text;
- building on local conventioins for mixing modes of communication;
- developing skills appropriate to the uses of literacy-and-speech for different situations such as local political meetings, business meetings, newsletter production, collective action.

All of these are available to the literacy tutor today, and all are potentially more sensitive to cultural variety and more able to build upon local meanings than traditional education and traditional literacy theory, with its 'great divide' and its belief in automatic social and cogitive progress associated with the acquisition of literacy itself.

COMBINING THEORY AND PRACTICE

In a recent review of books on literacy campaigns, Dan Wagner, Director of the Literacy Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania, regretted the 'gap in the conversation between research and policy perspectives in international literacy'. He hopes that 'the next generation of literacy campaign volumes will be able to provide such needed linkages'. If some of the new theoretical perspectives outlined above are incorporated into the campaigns of the next decade, then we shall have progressed in closing the gap and improving the quality of literacy work.

A combination of such theoretical understanding and of sensitivity to the cultural meanings of literacy are key elements if the calls for 'eradication of illiteracy' and for spreading literacy in the world's population are to have any meaning.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Brian V. Street to the cause of Literacy. Dr Street is currently Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex, UK. He did anthropological fieldwork on literacy and education in Iranian villages during the 1970s and has since published widely on the theory and practice of literacy. He is currently writing about literacy in the UK and USA.

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